

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ACCENT AND NATIONAL ORIGIN AMONG NATIVE ISRAELI HEBREW SPEAKERS: A PRELIMINARY REPORT¹

by

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ABSTRACT: This study reports on an experiment conducted to examine the ability of native Hebrew speakers to identify the general national background of other native Hebrew speakers, based on their accents. The results show that speakers made as many incorrect as correct identifications of speakers of General Israeli Hebrew (GIH) and Oriental Israeli Hebrew (OIH). As expected also, listeners were not able to identify speakers by specific country of origin. The study concludes that a typology of Israeli Hebrew should identify two groups, each with two subgroups:

- A. no [h] and no realization of /ʔ/ other than [ʔ] or zero (GIH)
 - 1. European extraction
 - 2. Middle East Extraction
- B. [h] and realizations of /ʔ/ other than [ʔ] or zero (OIH)
 - 1. denti-alveolar /r/—Yemenite extraction
 - 2. uvular /r/—Middle Eastern extraction other than Yemenite

1. Introduction

NATIVE ISRAELI HEBREW has generally been described (Blanc 1957, 1964; Morag 1959; and others) as existing in two varieties: General Israeli Hebrew (GIH) and Oriental Israeli Hebrew (OIH). These descriptions of

1. This paper has been adapted from Chapter 6 of the doctoral dissertation, "The Phonetics of Israeli Hebrew: 'Oriental' versus 'General' Israeli Hebrew," accepted for the Ph.D. degree by UCLA in September 1978. The work was made possible through the generosity of the Jewish Federation-Council of Greater Los Angeles, the Government of Israel, and the United States-Israel Educational Foundation. Many thanks are due to Dr. Wolf Leslau, under whose direction the work was done, and to Dr. Peter Ladefoged.

Hebrew designated the majority variety GIH because, while it was originally spoken by people of European stock, it had spread to such an extent that speakers could no longer be identified as to geographic origin. OIH, on the other hand, was so named because it was found only among people of Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds. While further communal differentiation within the various Oriental populations was unknown, it had not been excluded.

Several important differences were cited to justify these classifications. It was claimed that OIH possessed two additional phonemes, /h/ and /ʔ/, realized as [h] and [ʔ], respectively. In GIH, on the other hand, /h/ had shifted to the velar position, becoming /x/, while /ʔ/ had merged with /ʔ/, both realized as [ʔ] or, more commonly, zero. It was noted, however, that even some OIH speakers realized /ʔ/ only inconsistently. Furthermore, it was stated, /r/ was realized, as a rule, as [r] in OIH and [ʁ] in GIH, although some GIH speakers also showed [r]. Differences were also said to exist in both the grammar and the lexicon.

A recent study (Devens 1980), undertaken to document the changes of the last 15 years, has shown that at present the phonetic differences between GIH and OIH are relatively slight, at least among educated speakers. While maintenance of /h/ is the single, most outstanding mark of OIH, /ʔ/ has been drastically curtailed. In fact, in an average four minute segment of taped conversational speech, no more than 35 per cent of the occurrences of historical /ʔ/ showed realizations other than [ʔ] or zero. Dental articulation of /r/ no longer sets OIH apart from GIH, though the precise distribution of /r/ realizations needs further clarification. At any rate, the distribution is not along OIH/GIH lines and it seems fair to say that most speakers of both groups now employ [ʁ]. Communal differentiation within either the OIH group or the GIH group, except as is possibly reflected in the distribution of /r/ pronunciations, was not found.

Given this ongoing movement of OIH towards GIH, one would expect to find varieties intermediate between them. Such is indeed the case. "Intermittent" OIH is defined as the speech of an individual of Middle Eastern background in which [h] does appear, but with less than total consistency. The alternation between the [h] and [x] realizations of historical /h/ seems sometimes random and sometimes socially conditioned.

Thus, it would seem that OIH and GIH have continued toward merger and that communal sub-differentiation has been virtually eliminated. It should be impossible, then, to tell any more about an educated native speaker than that his family may have come (the GIH group) or definitely did come (the OIH group) from the Middle East or North Africa. Yet many Israelis still claim to be able to pinpoint not only the general national background, but even the specific country of origin, of *native* Israeli He-

brew speakers based on their accents. The obvious question is: did the investigator miss differences which the native speakers perceived? Or is there some other explanation?

It seemed to me that the second possibility was more likely. One must remember that native Israeli Hebrew speech among a significant percentage of the population is, of course, a relatively recent phenomenon. Most adults in Israel today grew up in a society of immigrants. With so many people acquiring Hebrew as a second language, popular stereotypes inevitably arose concerning the Hebrew speech of various immigrant groups. Possibly these stereotypes have simply been transferred by association to the next generation, the native speakers.

2. The Experiment

In order to shed some light on whether or not this theory had any basis in fact, an experiment in accent identification was conducted. Ten individuals, all native Israeli Hebrew speakers, were asked to listen to segments of speech recorded by each of the other members of the sample and to identify the background of the individual heard to the best of his/her ability. In addition, the listener was asked to explain how these conclusions were reached.

The segments were of two types: first, an isolated word list carefully edited to contain none of the known OIH cues (i.e., no occurrences of /h/ or /'/) and second, normal conversational speech. The word list selections were played first and then the conversation selections, with random ordering within each group. Thus, each person made approximately 18 separate identifications. The listeners were not aware that they were hearing the same person twice.

The sample itself was somewhat skewed. Of the ten individuals, seven were OIH or Intermittent OIH speakers and three were GIH speakers. There was one OIH speaker of Moroccan extraction, two OIH speakers of Yemenite extraction, one OIH speaker of Iraqi extraction, one Intermittent OIH speaker of Kurdish/Iraqi extraction, two speakers of mixed Middle Eastern backgrounds (one an OIH speaker and one an Intermittent OIH speaker), two GIH speakers of Iraqi extraction and one GIH speaker of Polish extraction. Nine out of the ten speakers were women, nine out of the ten were in the 20-30 age bracket, and nine out of the ten were university students or recent graduates. A complete description of the background of each member of the sample can be found in the responses to the questionnaires in the Appendix.

The sample was heavily biased in favor of speakers of Middle Eastern backgrounds because this experiment was an indirect outcome of the

3. Results

Key to Table 1

On Speaker:	Comments of Speaker:									
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#10	
S.S. #1 OIH Iraqi	—	M.E.	M.E.	M.E.	Fr. or Ar?	M.E.	Eur.	Rum.	Fr.?	
M.H. #2 OIH M.E.	Eng.	—	Iraqi	M.E.	Lib.	Yem.	Iraqi	Mor.	not M.E.	
R.M. #3 OIH Yem.	Kurd.	Yem.	—	Yem.	Yem.	— ¹	Yem. or Pers.	Mor. or Yem.	Eur.	
O.C. #4 OIH, Mor.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	—	M.E.	M.E.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	
A.A. #5 OIH Yem.	Mor.	Yem.	Yem.	M.E.	—	Iraqi	Kurd. or Pers.	Yem.	Yem.	
V.Z. #6 Int. OIH Iraqi	Iraqi	M.E.	— ¹	?	M.E.	—	Eur.	M.E.	Eur.	

On Speaker:	Comments of Speaker:									
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#10	
A.A. #5										
OIH, Yem.	Mor.	Yem.	Yem.	Yem.	—	Ir.	Pers.	Yem.	Yem.	
V.Z. #6										
Int. OIH Iraqi	Mor.	Eur.	— ¹	?	M.E.	—	M.E.	M.E.	M.E.	
M.A. #7										
Int. OIH M.E.	Pers.	Eur.	Span.	Eur.	?	M.E.	—	Eur.	M.E.	
L.S. #8										
GIH Iraqi	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	— ²	Eur.	M.E.	—	Eur.	
I.B. #9										
GIH, Iraqi	Ir.	Fr.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	
M.P. #10										
GIH Pol.	Pers. or Mor.	Eur.	M.E.	M.E.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	Eur.	—	

¹Speakers #3 and #6 are roommates and know each other's voices, so they did not listen to each other's segments.

²Speaker #5 left the country before speaker #8 could be recorded.

Table 2. *Accent identification made after listening to a segment of normal conversation.*

Let us look first at the ability of the listener to perceive the basic European/Middle Eastern split. In theory, all things being equal, the listener should have a 50/50 chance of making a correct identification when listening to a set of isolated words from which all known OIH cues have been eliminated. Except in the cases of speakers #3 and #5, this is generally what happened. If anything, looking at the judgments made on speakers #7, #8 and #10, identifications were more often incorrect than correct.

What about conversational data? Again, in theory, all things being equal, the listener should correctly identify OIH speakers as Middle Eastern all the time (based on the presence of [h], if nothing else) and have a 50/50 chance of correctly placing GIH speakers. Judgments on speakers #1-5 were totally consistent. This was not true for speakers #6 and #7, but note that this accurately reflects a confusing reality. These two individuals are Intermittent OIH speakers. Speakers #8-10, the GIH speakers, should

have been correctly identified 50% of the time. In fact, all three were more often than not deemed European. Possibly this is based on an assumption that, if no overt signs of Middle Eastern background are present, the speaker is most likely of European descent.

Now let us turn to the likelihood of correctly identifying the specific country of origin. According to the theory, listeners should have a near nil chance of identifying speakers from an isolated word list. This is precisely what the results show, again with the notable exception of speakers #3 and #5. One would expect that identification would be somewhat easier from conversational data, since non-linguistic cues are also present, but still the likelihood of precise identification should not be great. This again held true, except for speakers #3 and #5. In addition, it must be noted that speaker #1 was correctly identified as Iraqi with fair regularity.

Overall, the results of the experiment supported the theory, with one recurring notable exception. While there are many loose ends (e.g., why was speaker #7 identified incorrectly so overwhelmingly in table #1?, and more below), the fact remains that the members of the sample had great difficulty in placing a speaker's national origin. They could tell from conversational speech that a speaker must be Middle Eastern (in the case of the OIH speakers), but they could not consistently distinguish European from Middle Eastern GIH speakers. When OIH cues were eliminated, they could only randomly separate speakers of Middle Eastern and European origins. On the other hand, they could pick out speakers of Yemenite origin fairly consistently. A possible reason for this will be discussed below.

I have no explanation for the better-than-average identification of speaker #1 as Iraqi, though a possible reason will be mentioned below.

A. Correct Identifications

The most interesting aspect of this experiment lies in the reasoning given to support listener judgments, both correct and incorrect. This derives from both phonetic and cultural information. The identification of speakers as specifically Yemenite was apparently based on their use of the denti-alveolar realization of /r/. Thus while the original work (Devens 1980) on the characteristics of OIH suggested that /r/ distribution might be related to communal differentiation, perceptual judgments have reinforced this view. Not only were the only denti-alveolar /r/ users in the sample both of Yemenite origins, but people with denti-alveolar /r/ were generally deemed Yemenite.

Other correct identifications were based wholly or in part on cultural content cues. Speaker #7, an Intermittent OIH speaker, was classed as

Middle Eastern by speaker #6 on the basis of her description of how she cleans her floors! In addition to the aforementioned linguistic cues, speaker #8 cited cultural information in giving her reasoning for identifying speaker #5 as Yemenite. According to speaker #8, speaker #5's attitude toward religion was "typical of a Yemenite girl from a religious family." While no such overt declarations were made concerning speaker #1, it may be that content cues led to the frequent identification of her as Iraqi.

B. Incorrect Identifications

Incorrect identifications can be separated into three subgroups: (1) those based on accurate observations, (2) those based on inaccurate observations, and (3) those that are totally inexplicable or wild.

Some incorrect identifications derived from essentially correct phonetic observations. Moroccan immigrants are commonly described in Israel as having "strikingly harsh" sibilants. On this basis, speaker #1 identified speakers #5, 6 and 10 as Moroccan. The prominent sibilants were sometimes there, but these are undoubtedly a feature of the speech of young Israeli women, irrespective of national background (Blanc 1964, Chayen 1973, Devens 1978). In a similar vein, speaker #10's rendition of /sukar/ 'sugar'; as [súkaʁ], rather than the normative [sukáʁ], brought about an identification of her as Middle Eastern since it is "common knowledge" that certain Arabic dialects show penultimate stress.

Numerous incorrect identifications were based on clearly false assumptions. Speakers were judged variously as Kurdish, Moroccan, Tunisian, Iraqi, Rumanian, Libyan, and Arab on the basis of their pronunciation of /r/. All these judgments were incorrect. Those whose realizations of /g/, /k/ and /r/ sounded "back" to the listener were deemed Middle Eastern, and those who sounded "front" European. Again, in every case, it was an incorrect judgment. The quality of [h] was described once as "Yemenite" and once as "Iraqi," both in reference to speaker #4 whose family is Moroccan. Finally, Iraqis were said to have maintained "quf" (historical /q/) and a very strident tone, but the people in whom these were identified were not Iraqi. In none of these cases could the investigator independently confirm the underlying phonetic observation, either by hearing or by objective measurements (e.g., palatograms and spectrograms).

Finally, some responses were totally inexplicable, such as the identification of speaker #2 as a native speaker of English. This probably indicates only the lack of experience of the listener, speaker #1, who has no knowledge whatsoever of English. This may also be the case as regards speaker #8's classification of speaker #1 as Rumanian. Furthermore, I cannot explain why speaker #8 should be judged European (based on the

isolated word data) most of the time while speaker #10 is more often judged to be Middle Eastern.

4. Conclusion

Devens (1980) described native Israeli Hebrew as follows:

1. There is a three way division of speakers on cultural/linguistic grounds (GIH speakers of European background, GIH speakers of Middle Eastern background, and OIH speakers of Middle Eastern background);
2. the two GIH groups are not phonetically differentiable; and
3. the GIH/OIH phonetic split resides mainly in the presence in the latter of [h] and a realization of /ʔ/ other than [ʔ] or zero.

Clearly this description must be amended in at least one major way. OIH speakers of Middle Eastern background must be split into two groups: those showing a uvular realization of /r/ and those showing a denti-alveolar realization of /r/. The latter seem to correlate with Yemenite extraction.

Adding this information, the typology of Israeli Hebrew would be as follows:

Israeli Hebrew

- A. no [h] and no realization of /ʔ/ other than [ʔ] or zero (GIH)
 1. European extraction
 2. Middle Eastern extraction
- B. [h] and realizations of /ʔ/ other than [ʔ] or zero (OIH)
 1. denti-alveolar /r/—Yemenite extraction
 2. uvular /r/—Middle Eastern extraction other than Yemenite

Obviously this typology needs to be verified over a statistically significant number of speakers. These experiments should be done in such a way as to separate out linguistic and cultural cues as much as possible. Undoubtedly such verification will result in further modification of the typology. Further study of the distribution of [r]/[ʁ], to cite one obvious difficulty, may well require additions and/or corrections to the typology. But whatever the final outcome, it still must be said, on the basis of this experiment, that it is unlikely that the average educated native Israeli Hebrew speaker retains and exhibits sufficient phonetic characteristics held by his ancestral group to be so identified.

Appendix

Questionnaires

The following is the questionnaire administered to all members of the sample.

1. Name and address
2. Age
3. Birthplace
4. Birthplace of parents and date of immigration to Israel; if parents are Israeli-born, then birthplace and date of immigration of grandparents
5. Places lived as a child
6. Languages spoken at home: a) between parents; b) parents to children; c) children to parents; d) any others and under which circumstances
7. Ethnic mixture of neighborhood and school
8. Educational level
9. Languages known
10. Marital status
11. Birthplace and national background of spouse
12. Occupation
13. Occupation of parents
14. Occupation of spouse
15. How would you describe your Hebrew accent?
16. How would you describe the accents of your parents?
17. How would you describe the accents of your brothers and sisters?

Responses to Questionnaire #1

1. S.S., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 29
3. Jerusalem, Israel
4. Mother—Tel-Aviv; Father—Old City, Jerusalem; Maternal grandparents—Iraq, immigrated c. 1900; Paternal grandmother—Iraq; Paternal grandfather—Iran, both immigrated c. 1900
5. Rehov Agrippas (near Mahane Yehuda), Jerusalem, until age 11; Shaarei Tsedek, Jerusalem, until 18
6. a) Arabic, Judeo-Spanish; b) Hebrew, some Arabic; c) Hebrew; d) none
7. Generally people of Middle Eastern background
8. Through elementary school (8 grades)
9. Hebrew, some Arabic, understands Judeo-Spanish, Moroccan Arabic, and some Rumanian
10. Single
11. —
12. Metapelet (nanny)

13. Mother—housewife; father—truck driver
14. —
15. "Proper grammatical accent"
16. The same, especially mother
17. All (1 sister, 2 brothers, S.S. is second in line) have the same accents.

Responses to Questionnaire #2

1. M.H., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 27
3. Jerusalem, Israel
4. Both parents—Jerusalem; Maternal grandparents—Morocco, immigrated c. 1925; Paternal grandmother—Syria, immigrated c. 1910; Paternal grandfather—Israel (plus several more generations)
5. Shevet Tsedek (near Zichron Yosef), Jerusalem, until age 10; Romema, Jerusalem, until 18
6. a) Hebrew, Palestinian Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, Moroccan Arabic; b) Hebrew; c) Hebrew; d) none
7. People of Middle Eastern backgrounds
8. Currently graduate student in business administration
9. Hebrew, French, street Arabic, some English
10. Married
11. Australia of Australian and Rumanian parents
12. Student
13. Mother—head of cleaning staff at Hadassah Hospital; father—post office employee
14. Student
15. "Non-specific Sephardi (Oriental)"
16. Father sounds like old Jerusalemite; mother has a slight Moroccan accent
17. All (1 sister, 2 brothers, M.H. is the oldest) have more or less the same accent but the youngest sister (age 22) has a less markedly Oriental accent.

Responses to Questionnaire #3;

1. R.M., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 25
3. Jerusalem, Israel
4. Both parents—Yemen, immigrated in 1949
5. Rosh Ha-ayin, until age 14; Nes Tsiona, until 18
6. a) father speaks Hebrew; mother speaks half Hebrew, half Arabic; b) same as above; c) Hebrew; d) none
7. Yemenites

8. Currently second year student for B.A. in history/geography
9. Hebrew, English, Yemenite Arabic
10. Single
11. —
12. Student
13. Mother—housewife; father—political functionary
14. —
15. "Yemenite consonants and stress without the melody"
16. Yemenite, especially mother
17. All (5 sisters, 2 brothers, R.M. is third oldest) have the same accent.

Responses to Questionnaire #4

1. O.C., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 21
3. Jerusalem, Israel
4. Both parents—Casablanca, Morocco, immigrated in 1949 and 1951
5. Kiryat Yovel, Jerusalem, until age 6; Ofakim, until 14; Jerusalem, until 18
6. a) Hebrew, French, Moroccan Arabic with grandmother; b) Hebrew; c) Hebrew; d) none
7. Community was made up of people of Middle Eastern origins, but school was at Kibbutz Urim, which was mostly people of European origin
8. Currently first year student for B.A. in Hebrew language/Jewish thought
9. Hebrew
10. Single
11. —
12. Student
13. Mother—teacher's assistant; father—English teacher
14. —
15. "More or less Oriental"
16. Both very Oriental
17. A direct process from oldest (1 brother) to O.C. to youngest (1 sister) of loss of OIH

Responses to Questionnaire #5

1. A.A., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 22
3. Jerusalem, Israel

4. Both parents—central Yemen, immigrated in 1949
5. Jerusalem, until age 6; Kfar Saba, until 18
6. a) Yemenite Arabic; b) Hebrew, but grandmother speaks Yemenite Arabic; c) Hebrew, but Yemenite Arabic to grandmother; d) English among children as a game
7. People from all different kinds of backgrounds
8. Currently first year student for B.A. in social work
9. Hebrew, English, Yemenite Arabic
10. Single
11. —
12. Student
13. Mother—housewife; father—scribe
14. —
15. “Yemenite accent”
16. Yemenite accents
17. All (8 brothers, 6 sisters, ranging in age from 15 to 39, A.A. is 10th in line) have the same accent except one sister currently in the army who is consciously trying to drop OIH

Responses to Questionnaire #6

1. V.Z., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 26
3. Baghdad, Iraq, came to Israel when one month old
4. Both parents—Baghdad, Iraq, immigrated in 1951; Maternal grandparents and paternal grandfather are all from Kurdistan; paternal grandfather was from Turkey; all four came to Baghdad as children and spoke both Kurdish and Arabic
5. Nahlaot, Jerusalem
6. a) Arabic until V.Z. was 4; then Kurdish and Hebrew; b) Arabic and Hebrew; later Kurdish and Hebrew; c) Hebrew; d) none
7. Mostly people of Kurdish and Iraqi background
8. Currently first year student for B.A. in Jewish history
9. Hebrew, English, Kurdish, understands Arabic
10. Single
11. —
12. Student
13. Mother—housewife; father—grocer
14. —
15. “Oriental-Iraqi accent”
16. —
17. There are 3 brothers and 4 sisters (V.Z. is 2nd in line). Some speak OIH and some GIH but there is no correlation with age.

Responses to Questionnaire #7

1. M.A., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 24
3. Jerusalem, Israel
4. Mother—Old City, Jerusalem; Father—Iraq, immigrated in 1933; Maternal grandmother—Spain; Maternal grandfather—Yemen
5. Mahane Yehuda, Jerusalem, until age 10; Kiryat Moshe, Jerusalem, until 18
6. a) mostly Hebrew, some Arabic; b) Hebrew; c) Hebrew; d) none
7. Mahane Yehuda was entirely mixed, but Kiryat Moshe was mostly people of European background
8. Received B.A. in Hebrew literature/history
9. Hebrew, English, French
10. Single
11. —
12. Secretary
13. Mother—housewife; father—fireman
14. —
15. "like everyone else"
16. Father sounds Iraqi; mother sounds less Oriental
17. There are 2 brothers, 1 older and 1 younger. The oldest brother has a somewhat more Oriental accent than the others.

Responses to Questionnaire #8

1. L.S., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 25
3. Jerusalem, Israel
4. Mother—Kirkuch, Iraq; Father—Kurdistan, but moved to Baghdad at the age of 3; Parents immigrated in 1951
5. Kiryat Moshe, Jerusalem
6. a) generally Arabic, also Hebrew; b) generally Hebrew, also Arabic; c) Hebrew; d) Kurdish between father and his family
7. The community was mixed but the school was almost all of European origin until high school, when it was mixed again.
8. Currently first year student in a teacher-training seminar
9. Hebrew, Arabic, English
10. Single
11. —
12. Student
13. Mother—housewife; father—bus driver

14. —
15. "Clear Ashkenazi (European) accent"
16. Oriental accents, especially father
17. There seems to be a direct correlation between schooling and accent in L.S.'s family. L.S. is the oldest. A sister (age 23) attended school mostly with Orientals (Bet Elisheva) and had Oriental friends in the army; she speaks OIH. The next, a brother, age 22, experienced the same social situation (ORT school) and speaks OIH. The next brother, 19, went to school with Orientals (agricultural boarding school) but his friends were mostly Europeans. He speaks GIH. The next brother (age 18) attended the same school but associated with students from Oriental families. He speaks OIH. The two youngest, girls 15 and 11, both speak GIH. The older attends high school, mostly with Europeans (Alice Seligberg School) and the younger is still in elementary school, also mostly with Europeans.

Responses to Questionnaire #9

1. I.B., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 15
3. Jerusalem, Israel
4. Both parents—Iraq, immigrated in 1950 and 1952
5. German Colony and Rehavia, Jerusalem
6. a) Hebrew, Arabic, English; b) Hebrew, English; c) Hebrew, some English; d) none
7. The neighborhood was more Oriental, the school more European.
8. Currently 10th grade student at the Music Academy High School
9. Hebrew, English, understands Arabic
10. Single
11. —
12. Student and flutist
13. Mother—housewife; father—journalist for an Arabic language paper
14. —
15. "Swallows words"
16. Father has slight accent, mother none
17. She has 1 sister (age 23) who speaks GIH

Responses to Questionnaire #10

1. M.P., Jerusalem, Israel
2. 25

3. Afula, Israel
4. Both parents—Poland, immigrated in 1949
5. Moshav Balfouria in the Jezreel Valley
6. a) Yiddish; b) Hebrew; c) Hebrew; d) none
7. Almost entirely people of European background
8. Received B.A. in Hebrew language/Bible
9. Hebrew, Yiddish, English, writes Arabic
10. Single
11. —
12. Teacher of Hebrew language
13. Both parents—farmers
14. —
15. "Clearly Ashkenazi (European) Israeli"
16. Yiddish-Polish accents
17. M.P. has 1 younger brother who has the same accent.

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